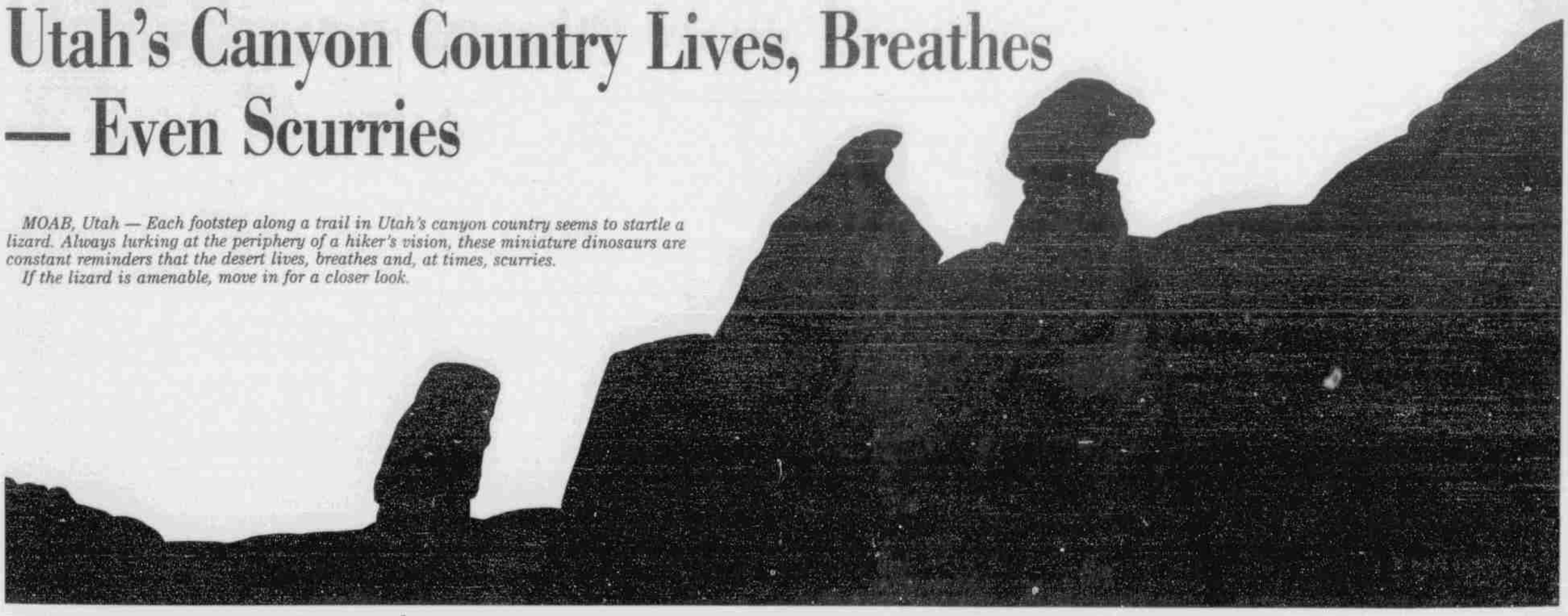
Utah's Canyon Country Lives, Breathes — Even Scurries



MOAB, Utah — Each footstep along a trail in Utah's canyon country seems to startle a lizard. Always lurking at the periphery of a hiker's vision, these miniature dinosaurs are constant reminders that the desert lives, breathes and, at times, scurries.

If the lizard is amenable, move in for a closer look.

By Bryan Marquard
NEWSDAY

Edward Abbey, whose writing put Utah's canyon country on the literary map, says this is the only way to see the desert. "... Crawl, on your hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus," he writes in "Desert Solitaire." "When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something. Maybe."

"Desert Solitaire," the late writer's paean to the wilderness of Arches and Canyonlands National Parks, has been drawing visitors to the area since its publication in 1968. Some are easily recognizable as pilgrims to "Abbey's country, the red wasteland." They roll into Moab with a tent and a tattered copy of the book in their rucksacks, having blithely ignored the warning Abbey included in his introduction: "... Most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide, but an elegy. A memorial."

He's right, of course. The national monument where he worked as a ranger became a national park in the 1960s. The roads are paved now, and many of its magnificent arches are easily accessible by car and RV. The little uranium mining town of Moab has even more recently evolved into a tourist center, the self-proclaimed mountain biking capital of the world.

But the spirit of the area evoked in Abbey's elegy and in the works of other writers can still be found in Arches and Canyonlands, those two vast tracts of desert to the east and west of Moab. For travelers willing to read before setting off for southeastern Utah, these writers' books provide a literary map to the mystical soul of the canyon country.

It is a four-hour trip from Salt Lake City to Moab. A good hour before you arrive, the 12,000-foot snow-capped peaks of the La Sal mountains rise like a mirage from the blood red rock on the horizon.

"When traveling to southern Utah for the first time, it is fair to ask if the redrocks were cut would they bleed," writes Terry Tempest Williams in "Coyote's Canyon." "And when traveling to Utah's desert for the second or third time, it is fair to assume that they do, that the blood of the rocks gives life to the country."

The literary pilgrim to Moab can find the complete works of Abbey, Williams and others while perusing the stacks at Back of Beyond Books, a shop on the town's main drag that is a paradise for wilderness enthusiasts. Jose, the manager, stocks most of the books in the review sections of publications like Sierra and Wilderness magazines. He's also an expert on local hikes. Butter him up by buying an armload of books and maybe he'll reveal the location of a nearby hidden canyon.

Once armed with books by Abbey, Williams and others, it's time to head off into canyon country — "an unlikely landscape," in Abbey's words.

It takes anywhere from 45 minutes to more than an hour to drive from Moab to the two eastern entrances to Canyonlands National Park. The access road for Arches National Park, however, is farther north. The park's sole campground is at the terminus of the paved road; arrive in early morning to secure a site.

Nearby is Devil's Garden Trail, a 4.5-mile loop that passes several arches. For those not up to the long hike, or those who neglect warning signs and rangers' advice to always carry water, Landscape Arch is less than a mile down the trail. This ribbon of rock — a span of nearly 300 feet — is the world's largest known natural arch.

The eroding forces of wind and rain remain at work, shaping nature's handiwork along the Colorado Plateau, and it's easy to think while looking at Landscape Arch that someday it must surely collapse.

Sometimes it's almost as if the sparse, desert landscape offers too much: Too many heart-stopping views, too many soothing, solitary hikes, too much beauty. It could even inspire brevity in Abbey, who knocked off eight novels and a dozen works of non-fiction before dying in 1989.

Hike out to Delicate Arch, a graceful, 45-foot-high span that frames the La Sal mountains to the southeast, and Abbey's assessment is sure to ring in your ears: "After Delicate Arch the others are anticlimactic."

After a day in the canyons, stop at the Main Street Broiler for a real taste of Moab. A small sign at each table warns patrons that fast service is not the place's forte. For those willing to wait, the menu ranges from burgers to vegetarian sandwiches; two can eat a day's worth of food for less than $10.

And keep an eye on the corner booths, where locals like Jim Stiles hold court. Stiles, a talented artist, publishes The Canyon Country Zephyr, a polished alternative newspaper that lists part-time Moab resident Robert Fulghum ("All I Really Need To Know, I Learned In Kindergarten") on its masthead as a roving reporter.

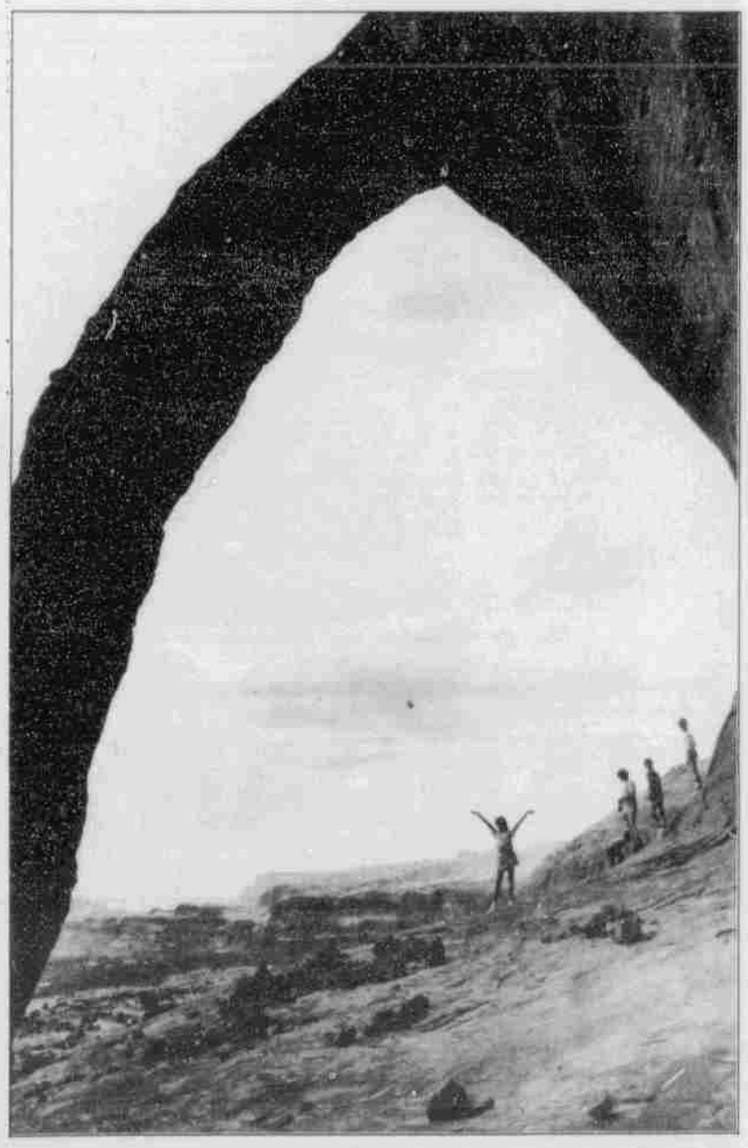
Reading the Zephyr can bring tourist guilt. Stiles can be as cantankerous as Abbey, calling for identification cards to be issued to longtime Moabites so that they can secure tables reserved for locals in tourist season.

He has a point. With its appeal as a destination point for hikers, bikers and those who want to raft down the Colorado and Green Rivers, Moab can get crowded during a season that lasts from February to December. Although there are hotels, motels and RV parks growing like weeds along the main drag and Route 191 on the outskirts of town, it's best to take a tent to the three national parks campgrounds. Better yet, get a free permit from the visitors center at each park entrance to hike a few miles into the back country and pitch a tent where ravens and coyotes are the nearest neighbors.

Spend enough time in the desert and it becomes clear that it is not just the animals and sparse fauna that live. Lie down on the rich red entrada sandstone and feel the rock breathe. Desert geology beats to a vastly different rhythm. In eastern cities, beats fall on seconds and minutes. In the desert, they fall on centuries and millennia.

Slow down enough and you can join a family whose members return to cities, but never really leave the desert.

"The canyons of southern Utah are giving birth to a Coyote Clan — hundreds, maybe thousands, of individuals who are quietly subversive on behalf of the land," Williams writes. "And they are infiltrating our neighborhoods in the most respectable ways, with their long, bushy tails tucked discretely inside their pants or beneath their skirts."



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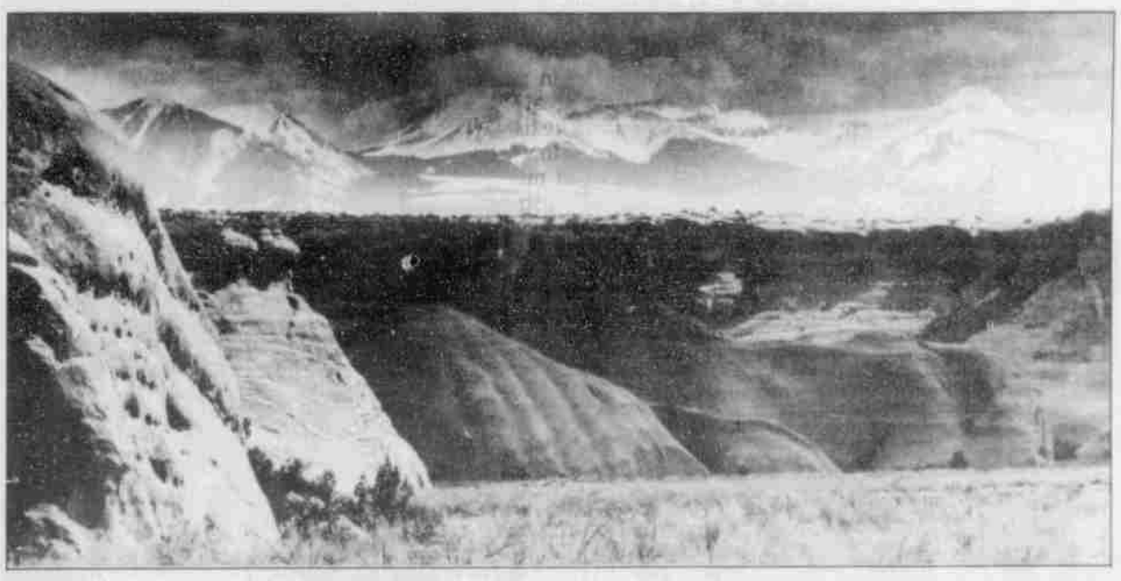

Office Gadgets Go Wild; Electronics Exorcist Called

By Jim Haner
KNIGHT-RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Deep in the bowels of the Broward County Governmental Center, the copy machine turns itself on and spews paper like a possessed Linda Blair launching lunch. Computer screens convulse and black out. And the electric typewriter in the corner clacks away — unplugged.

Poltergeists? Haunted microchips? Inquiring minds want to know.

"We've got a serious problem here, but we have no idea what's causing it," said records controller Sue Baldwin. "So far, we don't think it has any supernatural origins."

Her boss suspects the worst.

"We have tossed around the idea of sending an exorcist in there," Administrative Services Director Phil Allen joked. "It may be our last hope."

So who you gonna call?

"We're sort of like the Ghostbusters," said Mark Tatum, a trouble-shooter on electromagnetics who works for BWS Architects and Engineers, the firm hired by the county to purge the electronic demons. "There's a lot of speculation right now about what it might be."

Said Baldwin: "He's looking at everything — bouncing microwaves from another building, stray radio signals, electrical interference. "We're not having any trouble anywhere else in the building. Whatever it is, it's definitely something in that office."

Could it be ... Satan?

"In my experience, the chances of that are slim to none," Tatum said.

Unearthed Barbies Bring in Tons of Cash From Avid Collectors

By Debra Warner
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

In the 1960s, children loved Barbie but treated the doll like a toy. They chopped off her hair. They lost her charm bracelets and open-toe shoes. In the '70s, they let Mom pack Barbie off to the rummage sale.

Now, they want their Barbies back.

After years at the bottom of the toy chest, Barbie is as desirable a collectible as 19th-century porcelain dolls or Steiff teddy bears. The rare, mint-condition Barbie fetches hundreds, even thousands of dollars at Barbie auctions.

"To me, she's still sort of a plaything, but some people appreciate her as an art object," said Sarah Sink Eames, a renowned Barbie expert and author of "Barbie Fashion" (Collector Books).

Those who once traded Barbies at pajama parties now elbow each other at Barbie auctions and shows, sales venues that have sprung up across the nation during the past five years. The vinyl doll with ever-changing hair, makeup and outfits now boasts her own encyclopedias and price guides.

Mom would have fainted into her fondue pot if she had known the prices that Barbies would bring. When a 5,000-piece collection was stolen last month in San Diego, for example, the loss was estimated at $1 million.

Most of the collection was recovered; the owner, Glen Offield, was greeted with hugs by fellow collectors at a recent Barbie auction sponsored by Theriault's auction house in Los Angeles.

"I'm so happy," Offield said.

Offield may be the ultimate Barbie fan, one of the devoted core who must have each pillbox hat, houndstooth jacket and fur-collared cape sold since Barbie's 1959 debut.

Die-hard fans spend every dime on the hundreds of Barbie models — ponytailed and bubble-cut, blonde and brunette, straight-legged and Twist 'N Turn. They want every pal, from standbys Ken and Midge to mod cousin Francie.

"You know us collectors. Rich in Barbies and no money," Offield told his friends, Alva Christensen and her daughter, Laural, of Westminster, Calif.

Because of stiff competition, the pair keep their radar up at Barbie doll auctions, especially during the pre-auction viewings when they evaluate the dolls they want.

"We use code words, because if people follow us around, they'll bid against us," Laural Christensen said. Among their auction purchases: $1,900 for a pristine Barbie in a gold brocade dress and coat lined in pale blue satin, with the original, highly desirable pink box with Barbie silhouettes.

"You could make a collection out of just Mattel packaging, it was so fine," Alva Christensen said.

Carol Spencer, a Mattel designer who has helped dress Barbie for almost 30 years, stood like a beatific mother at the auction. Like other Barbie fans, she buys dolls and outfits to fill gaps in her collection.

"It's so much fun to come back and see what we designed and see people bid on it," Spencer said.

Barbie dolls from as recently as 1979 have gone up in value, but many collectors confine their cache to 1959-1972, Barbie's vintage period.

Her most collectible years started with the early Barbie of arched brows, side-glancing eyes, red lips and high ponytail. Then, for a few years, she was the ultimate average teen, with candy-striper and baby-sitting outfits. The influence of Jackie Kennedy brought a Barbie haute couture era, followed by the go-go-booted mod Barbie.

For some collectors, the doll is a mere mannequin for Barbie's luscious wardrobe. Barbie's outfits for the prom, the Easter Parade — even dancing to the hi-fi — were inspired by Chanel, Dior, Givenchy and Balenciaga.

Thirty years ago, little Susie could plunk down $1 to $5 for a themed outfit with accessories, such as "Barbie in Hawaii" or "Ken's Saturday Date." Collectors pay more than 10 times those amounts.

In 1965, Barbie's mink stole cost $8, which was a lot of baby-sitting money. In August, a collector paid $1,000 for the tiny strip of fur at a Barbie auction in Washington, DC.

Other must-haves for the devout Barbie collector: Barbie furniture by the Susy Goose company, which sells anywhere from $5 for a worn-out plastic wardrobe, to $1,000 for a white plastic piano with gilded decorations, fit for a French queen, as Christensen would say. Barbie carrying cases sell for up to $150.

Like comic books, board games and other baby-boomer collectibles, Barbie's value skyrocketed because, although millions were produced, only a fraction survive in good condition.

The most desirable are the "NRFBs" — dolls and outfits that were never removed from their boxes. These unopened Barbies are found stuck in an attic among old Christmas gifts or at the bottom of an old trunk. Now and then, a store unearths old boxes of Barbies in a warehouse or closet, Eames said.

The top figures tossed around send us running to the garage to find old Barbies. Truth is, unless you treated Barbie like porcelain or have a rare model, you'd be lucky to get $50.

"People think they have a wonderful Barbie, and all they did is trim its hair a little," Alva Christensen laughed. "That's like saying, I have a brand new car and didn't dent it very much when I ran into the telephone pole."